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TO TOUCH INWARD SPRINGS

An Address Delivered By

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The beginning of the school year is the time to talk about what we are trying to do in our school of religion.

Channing has put it very well in his statement on the Sunday School. I suppose if we were to interpret Channing in twentieth century language we would liken his approach to that of the psychiatrist Abraham Maslow who is one of the leading thinkers in this field today, who speaks of the self-actualizing person as the ideal. Channing was trying to tell us that we should develop self-actualizing persons. He was trying to tell us that this should be the purpose of a program of religious education; and over the years we have sought to develop such a program. Our curriculum is designed to help the person realize himself. Channing put it in different words which I think are more lyric and perhaps we would remember better. He said: "To touch inward springs". And mind you when he said this he was not thinking of a coiled piece of metal or a bed spring. He was talking rather of the kind of spring that we find in the hills, a spring of water which flows out of the earth. His concept was really one of saying that if you would try to help your child you do not try to pound something into him from outside, you try to touch those springs of life which dwell within him and get them to flowing more fully. Take the cover off the spring, or clean out the spring, so that the water flows more clear and pure.

Well, every year at this time, I think back, of course, to my own childhood. One of the memories came to me especially this year because we have a new course in our curriculum which talks about James and James is a negro. It was only natural that I should recall one of my first playmates whose name was James and he was a negro too. As I think back to this experience, it gains more significance that my parents never told me that I shouldn't play with James. They encouraged it. They liked James and James was welcome inside my house as well as in my backyard and out on the street. So that from the very beginning my parents did something for me in this way that relates to what I'm talking about this morning. They valued friendship and understanding of others far above any consciousness of race. James to them was a person. And I think because of that experience I have never had the feelings of prejudice that many of my classmates and many of my other playmates from that long distant time had and still have.

I think again, when I speak of touching inward springs, of my "drinking uncle". On my father's side I come from a long line of Welsh coalminers, and coalmining is a very difficult kind of work. It was much harder work in the days of my uncle than it is today and so the coalminers of Wales were a tough, hard-bitten lot. One would think that there would be no opportunity for any sensitivity to develop in these people. I remember an uncle of mine telling me that they used to walk seven miles every morning to the pithead. Most of you would feel you were crippled for life if you had to walk seven miles all at once, but they walked the seven miles just to start the day and then they worked ten hours in the pit, and then they came out and walked seven miles home again. It was a hard, tough life, and I attribute to this the fact that I have a physique that doesn't suffer very much from the usual kind of physical ills. But there is sensitivity in these people as evidenced by Dylan Thomas. And whenever I think of Dylan Thomas I think of the uncle that I'm talking about now. I called him my drinking uncle because he was an alcoholic, and I think he was an alcoholic because he had more sensitivity than anybody else in that family. He was frustrated by trying to express this sensitivity, because everywhere he turned all the forces of society that beat down the coalminers beat him down; so he escaped from this by turning to the bottle. But I'm not telling you this except to indicate the depth of sensitivity that this man had. He was the only person in my whole family on either side that ever gave me books to read and he introduced me as a child to some of the finest books that I have ever read. I can remember also occasions when

he was relatively sober going on walks in the country with him. He revealed things to me about nature. When I think back on it, my love of nature, and it's a strong love, began to develop with those experiences in my early childhood with this uncle. He touched some inward springs in me. He was not a teacher, he had no curriculum, but he had the sensitivity and the awareness of life and somehow perhaps he sensed that I had it too and he wanted to help to open these doors for me.

Well, I think also of my first Sunday school teacher. I'm sorry to say that she was the only one that I remember with any great favor. The rest of them, some of whom I remember, had no effect whatever on me and had no effect on anyone else in the classes I was in. But I recall when our youngest daughter was about four years old we went down home to see my parents. On Sunday we went to the old church in which I had grown up and we put Anne in the beginners' class in Sunday school. After church was over (and of course Anne was a well-brought up, enthusiastic Unitarian at this early age) she said: "I liked that teacher, I really liked her." Well, that teacher had been my mother's first Sunday School teacher and she had been my first Sunday School teacher. This recollection brings to my mind the fact that it is the qualities that lie in the person who teaches that count; because it wasn't what she taught, it was the way she did it - to use Gibran's phrase, it was not the wisdom she imparted, it was the lovingness that she exuded as part of her classroom experience, that made three generations like this teacher. And perhaps I would have more to say for orthodoxy if her successors had been more like her.

Or I think of the teacher that I had in highschool, a Mr. Blakesley, who was regarded by the students as well as his fellow-teachers as a kind of an odd-ball. But he was the only highschool teacher that ever really registered with me. Whether or not you can believe this, he made history come alive for me and so he opened up many new vistas. He touched those inward springs. And then I remember in my theological student days a professor of Old Testament who again was the kind of person who could touch inward springs. He could make the Old Testament come alive even to people like me who didn't believe it.

These are experiences that I recall on a day like this and they are all too few. This brings me to one last recollection which was not my own experience but one which was passed on to me by a teacher in this same Sunday School that I grew up in. When I was Director of Religious Education in that church, a teacher spoke to me about a little boy who was about eleven years old who came occasionally. He was a rough, tough customer. He was a childhood delinquent. At the age of eight he had his first police record. I should mention, by the way, that I grew up in a slum neighborhood. Well, you know, no city that you ever live in has slums, but other cities do and so now that I have left my home town I can look back at it and remember that I lived near the slums in what we would call a depressed area or blighted area. This little boy grew up about two blocks from where I lived, and he lived in a slum. He could be violent and mean and vicious. By the age of eleven he had his own gang. Why he ever came into our Sunday School I don't know. I suspect that this teacher, because of some understanding qualities that she had, might have helped him somehow. She had learned something about him from talking to one of his teachers in school who also had some understanding and one of the things that they discovered was that this boy loved music and was enraptured by violin music. So these teachers made it possible for this boy to take violin lessons. I don't know what the outcome of this was. I like to hope that he might have gone on to become a competent, if not a great, musician. I suspect that the frustrations of his surroundings (his father was an alcoholic and his mother died of tuberculosis) might have crushed him too much for him to achieve greatness. But even if it led him along the path a little farther in the way of appreciation through music, these teachers touched inward springs.

The significance of this, of course, comes home to us in relation to our own approach

to education. It wasn't what the teachers were teaching in the way of curriculum of the classroom, whether it was on Sunday or on Tuesday, it was the fact that they had some human understanding and that they were able to touch inward springs. They were able to clear out that mass of accumulated rubbish that had stopped up the springs in this lad's soul and open them up so that the fresh water could flow again. This is what we're trying to do. And I think nothing is more important than this. Our educational problem, it seems to me, is illustrated by that quotation from Henry Miller. You see, even looking at the knot in a wooden door could be for him the beginning of the opening up of new vistas. Well, I think it's illustrated again by something that Paul Goodman said in a book about education, and he's dealing really here with highschool and college, but it's significant and so I'm going to read it:

"Intellectually, humanly, and politically, our present universal highschooling and vastly increasing college-going are a disaster. I will go over the crude facts still again. A youngster is compelled for twelve continuous years, if middle-class for sixteen years, to work on assigned lessons during the lively period of life when one hopes he might invent enterprises of his own. Because of the school work, he cannot follow his nose in reading and browsing in the library or concentrate on a hobby that fires him or get a job or carry on a responsible love affair or travel or become involved in political action. The school system, as a whole, with its increasingly fed curriculum, stricter grading, incredible amounts of testing, is already a machine to shape acceptable responses. Programmed instruction closes the windows a little tighter and it rigidifies the departmentalization and dogma. But worst of all it tends to mullify the one lively virtue that any school does have, that it is a community of youth and of youth and adults. For sixteen years it is docility to training and boredom that is heavily rewarded with approval, legitimacy and money, whereas spontaneous initiation is punished by interruption, by being considered irrelevant, by anxiety of failing in the important work and even by humiliation and jail. Yet somehow after this hectic course of conditioning, young men and women are supposed on commencement suddenly to exercise initiative in the most extreme matters; to find jobs for themselves in a competitive market, to make long career plans; to undertake original artistic and scientific projects, to marry and become parents, to vote for public offices. But their behavior has been shaped only too well. Inevitably, most of them will go on with the pattern of assigned lessons as organization men or on the assembly line. They will vote democratic-republican and buy right brands." Goodman presents us there with the real problem of modern education. He gives us therewith an indication of what we need to understand about our own approach to education. When I say our own, I mean the one that has been developed by our denomination. It may not be yours and sometimes I'm deeply concerned because I'm afraid it is not yours. We often take an approach which is developed out of the sort of education that Goodman is criticizing, and are rather appalled because the Unitarian school of religion does not do this with our children. And so instead of being concerned about touching these inward springs we either are indifferent to what goes on, or we ask "Why isn't the child learning something?" and when we say why isn't he learning we mean some sort of book-learning, like why doesn't he learn the Ten Commandments or why doesn't he learn more about the Bible? Why doesn't he learn more about this and that? Well, it's because we're not trying to teach him about these things.

We are not trying to give our children a set of extraneous facts. They get some information along the way, and I suspect that they get more useful information than I ever got in an orthodox Sunday school, which, incidentally was about as well run a Sunday school as I have ever encountered anywhere, so don't put it down to that kind of failure. No, we're not trying to give a set of statistics or information of that kind. We're not trying to fill these minds with ready answers. Parents again and again say to me: "Our Sunday School isn't doing anything for my little John because when he meets children on the street and his playmates they talk about religion and they know their religious outlook and he doesn't. They know what a Catholic is

or what an Anglican is or United Church - we don't know". Well, of course, those kids don't know either and don't fool yourself that they do. It's only our fright that gets in the way here. But what we're trying to do is far more important than giving a set of ready answers where, by asking a question you turn on a tape-recorder in the child's mind that says a Unitarian believes: one, two, three, four, five. The whole genius of Unitarianism lies in the fact that we don't have a one, two, three, four, five.

We are not trying to indoctrinate our children because indoctrination as an approach to education has proven now for some three thousand years an abject failure. It is indoctrination that has created the mess of Vietnam. It is indoctrination that has led to what is now going on in India and Pakistan. It was indoctrination that led to the horrors of World War II. Isn't it about time we started to forget about indoctrination or to get rid of it and to replace it with another kind of approach? In other words, to try to touch the inward springs that ought to flow freely and make a person self-realizing? Well, I say, our purpose is to provide an atmosphere in which a child will receive inspiration. Out of this inspiration will come a desire to find the answers to the things that are important, just as looking at that knot in the door led Miller to speculate about a whole series of things that resulted in half an hour's talk. We're trying to inspire the child to do these things for himself. Our purpose is to cultivate curiosity, to encourage children to ask more questions, not less; but when they ask the questions, not to hand them a ready answer but to encourage them to go find the answers for themselves. It is only the answers that they find for themselves that will stand with them for the rest of their lives, that will develop within them any personal acceptance and integrity.

Our purpose is to open doors to new experience, not to give them a recitation of the experience of others from the past. They will look into the experiences of the past themselves when they find some experiences that have some meaning of their own. I think this is what I meant when I said that Mr. Blakesley gave me a living sense of history - he brought history alive for me, because his approach was one which helped me relate history to the questions which I was asking about my own life now. Why are we doing what we do in this community in which I live? And he helped me to realize that I could understand a little better what we were doing now if I knew what people had done in the past. And so it was not opening up a book about the past but rather making me see that the past experiences relate to the experiences of the present. Well, this is what we want to do, to open doors to new experience.

We want as one of our purposes to give a child a sense of wonder. To make him sense that life is wonderful and that the experiences of life, whether they be the experiences of nature or of family or of community, whatever they may be, that they are wonderful and when I say wonderful I mean it in the precise definition of the word which means to wonder at, to have this sense of awe and exhilaration about life. I was a little bit disappointed in a way when they dropped the title of one of our courses which was called How Miracles Abound. Now I don't believe in miracles and I presume you don't, but at the same time this title gave something to that course which I thought set it apart from a prosaic approach to science. Well, we've dropped the name and I've forgotten what the new title is but it's more prosaic, it's more in line with the kind of thing that we ought not to be trying to do. This course is an example of one of the puzzles that we have in our whole curriculum because many of our parents and many of our teachers fail to understand what this is trying to do. So, when we look for a teacher for this course, very often we run around to find somebody who teaches science, and this isn't really what we want at all. A teacher who teaches science may be able to teach this course but he may be just as poor a teacher at this as anyone else. Because we're not trying to give a course in science. He can get that a lot better in public school than anything we can do on Sunday morning. What our course tries to do

is, through looking at some of these scientific developments, to give the child a sense of wonder. We talk about the snowflake and we can reveal all the geometric patterns of the snowflake and we can tell the child how the snowflake comes into being and this can be a very dull, uninteresting kind of thing, but this is not what we're trying to do. The chemistry of the snowflake, the physics of the snowflake, are something that can be much better developed in another course somewhere outside of our school. No, what we're trying to do is help the child to develop that sense which I suspect he starts out with; at the time of the first new-fallen snow to have that feeling of the wonder of it, the beauty of it, the magnificence of it. Now a scientific understanding of how the snowflake is constructed can help to give us this sense of wonder, but if we're not doing what we do in the classroom in the direction of giving that sense of wonder, then we have missed the boat entirely. It's this experience of a sense of wonder. This is why we take children out to the farm in the spring if we have an opportunity and a farm to go to. This is why we take them on excursions to the museum and the art galleries, to help them experience that sense of the wonder and of the grandeur and of the magnificence of life.

Our purpose, again, is to widen their horizons of understanding. If we talk about the Old Testament and if we talk about The Church Across the Street it's not so much to give them some set of facts about these so that they can counter them in an argument, it's to give them a better understanding of how other people live so that their horizons of understanding are widened.

Perhaps the most important thing that we strive to do is to help the child to know and to accept himself. And this can never be done by indoctrination, by quoting from a book or memorizing a phrase. This can only be done by the sharing of human experiences that explore life and seek to understand it better. So our purpose is to achieve this kind of self acceptance, self-realization, which is never fulfilled unless it goes on to social realization. We try to do this through the classroom experience, through play and experiment, through investigation, and discussion. If you as parents are puzzled sometimes and wonder why the classes use paints or clay, why they get themselves messed up like they do sometimes, it is in order to touch these inward springs. This is something that always reveals to me that we have not yet escaped the hangover of orthodoxy; we most of us dress our children up to the hilt on Sunday just as we were trained to dress up. I can remember for years the only time I wore good clothes was on Sunday and even today I have a thing about this. I'm always a little hesitant about putting on a good suit during the week because of this hangover from orthodoxy. But we dress our children to the hilt and then we complain because they get paint on a white shirt or get clay on their pants or their panties. My wife had a difficult time with some parents in another city because they insisted on dressing their children and then insisted on complaining. She said to them: "Why don't you put blue jeans on the kids when you send them to Sunday School?" They replied, "Oh, my God, we couldn't do that on a Sunday morning!" - and you see this shows how crippling that kind of experience has been to many of us. We ought to be able to send our children into this school of experience that I've been talking about dressed in the kind of clothes which will enable them to participate in life rather than to sit as prettified spectators on the sidelines. This is what we're trying to do in our school and this is far more important than any of the kind of booklearning or memorizing or the other things that sometimes we think are important. And so as we go into this new year, I hope that you will endeavor to appreciate more what we are trying to do, so that you will then help the teachers in their efforts to work with your children, so that, in our approach to religion, we will really touch inward springs.

